

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING COMMITTEE

Fiscal Year 2008

Synopsis

After a decade of planning work, our goal is finally in sight: In the past fiscal year, the Comprehensive Planning Committee (CPC) took the most important steps in the Master Planning process, turning our draft chapters over to the consultants, and in turn receiving a completed draft Master Plan from them.

Personnel Changes

The Committee continued to function smoothly and without interruption despite a number of significant changes in staffing and membership. At the consulting firm of ACP-Visioning & Planning, Ltd., Suzanne Nienhaber took over from Jennifer Lindbom at the New York office, working with Principal in Charge Jamie Greene (Columbus, OH) from the start of the fiscal year. Amherst Senior Planner Niels la Cour resigned in autumn of 2007 to take a position at the University. Planning Director Jonathan Tucker stepped in to take his place.

In the course of the year, a number of Committee members also left, and most slots were not filled with new members. At this late stage in the planning process, most would have lacked the necessary familiarity with the process and evolving text. The exception was Andrew Churchill, who assumed the School Committee seat formerly held by Alisa Brewer, vacant since April 2007. Cyrus Cox resigned de facto through extended absence. Carol Rothery formally resigned due to other commitments. Longtime member Alan Root announced his resignation from this and all other Town bodies, effective 1 January, as he devoted himself to other pursuits on the occasion of his eightieth birthday. We congratulate him and thank him for his service. Chair Eric Nakajima resigned at the end of summer 2007 when he took a new job in the Governor's office in Boston. Vice Chair Jim Wald thereupon stepped in to take his place. Cheryl Zoll (former Vice Chair, during FY 07) also stepped down as an at-large member, finding that her duties as Director of the Survival Center demanded all her time. We did not elect a new Vice Chair, leaving that office vacant. Finally, we note with deep sorrow the absence of Frank Wells, who passed away just before the end of fiscal year 2008. We will miss him greatly.

(Full membership records and related documents are available in the Planning Department Office.)

Major Accomplishments and Activities

(I refer you to last year's report for the details on the background and progress of the Master Plan.)

As FY 07 came to a close, our work groups, drawn from both the CPC and members of the community-at-large, completed their editing of draft strategies for each of the legally mandated substantive chapters of a Master Plan: Land Use, Housing, Economic Development, Natural and Cultural Resources, Open Space and Recreation, Services and Facilities, Transportation and Circulation.

Soon afterwards, we completed the scientific community survey, conducted by David Loomis of the University of Massachusetts. As a qualitative pendant to this quantitative instrument, we circulated a special detailed survey to each Town Meeting member.

The lead consultants, ACP, then set about comparing the draft strategies and survey results in order to fine-tune specifics and prepare the complete draft plan. Although the CPC suspended full-committee meetings for this brief transitional period, the work of CPC continued on a smaller scale: (1) The Chair and Vice Chair (Eric Nakajima and Jim Wald) continued to hold regular (generally weekly) conference calls with Senior Planner Niels la Cour and the consultants. (2) An Approval Process Subcommittee (Rob Crowner, Jim Oldham, Alan Root, Jim Wald; with Niels la Cour, staff) met to discuss steps to follow completion of the Plan.

In August, the consultants presented both the formal survey results and the complete draft Plan to the full CPC. We held one final and well-attended information session at the Bangs Center in early September, where we presented the gist of the Plan, orally and in writing, to the community. With this final piece of crucial public input at our disposal, we set about assessing the draft Master Plan. Throughout the autumn, task forces made up of CPC members went over one chapter each in painstaking detail, scrutinizing it for completeness, and periodically reporting back to the full committee. On 11 December, the full CPC unanimously approved the complete draft Master Plan and voted to turn it over - along with our recommendations for revisions - to the consultants.

ACP worked on the drafts in the early 2008, turning the completed Master Plan back to the Town on 11 March. We shared the new draft with the full CPC and then set about reviewing the Master Plan in detail again. This time, however, rather than creating a separate task force for each chapter, we authorized creation of a single subcommittee to review all chapters: the best way, to our mind, to ensure thoroughness and consistency. The members of the subcommittee were as follows: Jim Wald (CPC Chair), Aaron Hayden (CPC Secretary), Marilyn Blaustein, Andy Churchill, Rob Crowner, Jim Oldham, Claude Tellier, Molly Turner, and Walter Wolnik, joined by Senior Planner Jonathan Tucker (staff) - and, when their schedules permitted, Doug Kohl and Joanne Levinson.

Our aim was, first, to identify any gaps (which might become apparent only once we had the entire document in front of us,) and further, to strive for consistency and clarity of presentation. The consultants had accepted many of our revisions, but declined to act on some others, either because their judgment differed from ours or because they found it impractical to carry out the requested changes at this late stage in the process (their contract had formally expired in September, but at our request, they extended it several times without asking for additional remuneration). This method of review proved to be a salutary and effective one. The Subcommittee met weekly.

By the end of the spring, we had gone over more than two thirds of the Master Plan (portions of it several times) and could see that we were approaching the end of our work but would require some additional months to achieve closure (given that the summer, with the inevitable periodic absence of Subcommittee members, was upon us).

This being the case, we also determined that a few very specific tasks could remain to be completed even after the draft was in essence done:

- 1) Planning Department staff would need to review all facts and figures (particularly in “existing conditions” sections; see also below) for currency and, further, insert appropriate graphics and maps.

(2) Chapter 10, on “Implementation,” contains a matrix of necessary actions. Although the tasks listed there will remain as they are, we chose to leave the entries for the responsible parties and target dates open for the time being. Rather than rushing to complete this section with unseemly haste at this late stage, we thought it most prudent to leave the decision to the Planning Board, which will officially accept the Plan and thereupon take charge of actual implementation.

Postscript and Prospects

Update:

Because the charge of the Committee was to run out at the end of this past fiscal year, I will take the liberty of including this addendum, which brings matters up to date. Given that we were close to concluding our work, the Select Board this summer authorized us to continue till completion with our original membership, regardless of the status of individual members on their respective home committees. We set ourselves the ultimate target of completion by 31 October, which is to say: just before elections and Fall Town Meeting. I am very pleased to report that we completed our formal work at a meeting on 9 September. Pending a few technical corrections and insertion of supporting material by Town Staff, we will be able to turn the Master Plan over to the Planning Board on deadline.

Issues:

Because this is the final formal report of the Comprehensive Planning Committee, this is also, as promised last year, the appropriate place to offer a few more general observations about the nature, strengths, and weaknesses of our process.

Quality of service by consultants

The single most glaring and consistent problem involved Stantec Consulting, which was supposed to have been responsible for assistance with select components such as Services and Facilities and Transportation and Circulation. Stantec failed to provide the complete services promised - and moreover, to respond to repeated calls for rectification. In particular, “existing conditions” sections of relevant chapters were incomplete or curiously skewed. As a result, Town Staff and members of the CPC task forces and Review Subcommittee this year found their work unnecessarily complicated, as they were forced either to work around lacunae or to seek out additional information on their own, in either case expending time that they did not have and should not have needed to waste.

Some CPC members felt that the presentation of the survey results by David Loomis lacked closure: that raw data were not fully and usefully put at the disposal of the Committee, or overall results, more generally, presented in the most effective and complete manner. The latter were moreover not shared with the CPC until the time that ACP was ready to make use of them. In fairness, however, the survey was distributed well behind schedule, the responsibility for which indisputably lies at CPC’s door (more on related matters below).

Views on the performance of ACP (the lead consulting team) were more positive, but not unmixed. The firm came to us highly recommended, and known in particular for its public-input process, which was of course of paramount importance in Amherst. In the beginning, the communication between consultants and CPC could arguably have been smoother. In particular,

at the time of the initial citizens' gatherings, the consultants' instructions arrived on very short notice, and their explanation and application of the principles at times seemed somewhat mechanical. One occasionally had the feeling that Amherst was just a name inserted in a template.

That said, the amount and degree of cooperation steadily increased, and the consultants soon got a very accurate feel for Amherst, its values, and its *modus operandi*. Since becoming Vice Chair and Chair, I of course had the opportunity to interact more often and more closely with ACP. It was a pleasure to work with the consultants as we entered the most challenging phase of work. Their advice was sound, and their patience admirable.

CPC and Town staff and bodies

Patience was indeed a necessary virtue. The biggest disappointment that some of us felt was that this Plan could have been much more: something richer, more distinctive, and more creative, which made fuller use of the intellectual resources of the citizens and the tools at the disposal of the Planning Department. The biggest practical problem that we faced was that we were consistently behind schedule. These issues are intimately related. Several problems stand out.

(1) For several years, there was clearly a lack of complete trust and/or effective communication between the Select Board and CPC. In response, the Select Board, somewhat controversially, mandated a significant expansion of CPC membership in 2006. As we noted in last year's report, that presumed advantage clearly came at a price: New members, many unfamiliar with planning issues in general and this committee and its workings in particular, joined the CPC and needed to be brought up to speed just as the newly hired consultants were conducting the ramp-up to the public input process. Not coincidentally, as we also noted last year, the consultants' monthly status reports almost immediately began to contain "red flags" warning of missed deadlines.

Deadlines remained a problem, but in the past two years, thankfully, we have seen no further signs of discord between CPC and Select Board. Cooperation between the two bodies has grown steadily, and indeed, relations are cordial and productive.

(2) A related issue is a certain (some would say: pervasive) climate of distrust between many citizens, on the one hand, and Town staff and other professionals, on the other. Both the consultants and Town Staff occasionally expressed frustration, saying they felt they were not being allowed to use their training to the fullest. They felt constrained in their ability to make professional recommendations, and as a result, forced to confine their input to generic administrative tasks. Proposals that they made were sometimes not validated unless and until a committee member at-large had made the same point, often much later. To their mind, staff and consultants were not criticizing popular participation, as such, but rather, what they perceived as a reflexive and ultimately paralyzing suspicion of all forms of expertise and authority (under which rubric critics sometimes lumped Town employees, chairs of boards and commissions, and commercial interests). This was certainly one factor behind the departure of a senior member of the Planning Department in the middle of the Master Planning process. The other side of the coin is that some on CPC felt that consultants or members of Town staff were taking too direct and personal a hand in things, trying to impose their views or otherwise proceed too rapidly, and thus seeking to shove pre-cooked proposals down the throats of rank-and-file committee

members. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the one tendency inadvertently reinforced the other.

(3) Finally, there is the seemingly changeless Amherst passion for deliberation, discussion - and inadvertently, but unavoidably: delay. To what extent the delays were a product of proverbially making the perfect the enemy of the good, or simply of a congenital inability to reach any decision and meet any deadline, is hard to say. Whatever the cause, the fact is indisputable.

All three factors caused us to fall and consistently remain behind schedule. In the abstract, this is not the worst thing in the world (acting precipitously on the basis of erroneous information or faulty logic or both, for example, might be). However, there was a concrete price to be paid.

The persistent slowness and failure to meet deadlines forced us constantly to scale back our ambitions: to focus on basic facts and policies, to deliberate at great length (at times: quibble) over fine points of wording rather than to reach for more adventurous proposals or a bold vision that we could support and convey with the latest technological and methodological tools at our disposal. Ironically, then, our incorrigible indecisiveness as well as skepticism regarding expertise arguably produced a more anodyne document that, although duly acknowledging and incorporating the mass of public input, actually looks and sounds much more like the generic product of a consulting firm. This is a result that we would do well to ponder.

Indecisiveness and endless deliberation, to be fair, are nothing new in Amherst. Perhaps they are indeed akin to a hereditary condition. As the *Amherst Bulletin* put it, quoting its predecessor more than a century ago:

Townpeople were so picky about building a Town Hall in 1889 that it prompted this observation in an 1890 edition of the former *Amherst Record*: 'We should bear in mind the fact that the architect of the Cathedral at Milan, backed by the wealth of the universe, could not have designed a village horse-shed that would meet with universal favor at the hands of the citizens of Amherst.'

A statement in the consultants' final letter is both diplomatic and damning:

With this final submission ACP is concluding its involvement in the Master Planning process . . . This is now your document, and it is up to the CPC, planning staff, and Planning Board to bring it to its final state and prepare it for adoption. We say this with full acknowledgement of the challenge that it implies for you given the general [level] of angst of your deliberations.

[. . . .]

When we started this process we were under no illusion that working with you and your community would be an easy undertaking. Given the lack of a master plan for nearly 40 years as well as the 10 years it took to actually launch this planning process, we were certain this would be very challenging. In spite of this we were optimistic that you could come together to work on behalf of the best interests of the community. We believe that many of you have done so. And even though you may not have the "perfect plan" - one that you would have produced if you did it yourself - you do have a very solid and comprehensive policy guide for the Town. I will continue to hope that you can reach agreement on outstanding items (of both form and substance) and start to put the plan to use. Town residents deserve it.

On a final note, I want you to know this is not the typical way our processes proceed or conclude. We have worked in some very complicated communities with very pressing and complex issues. We have been able to consistently assist those communities get to where they both needed and wanted to get. I hope that we have been able to help the Town of Amherst. It is a terrific community and we wish you the best of luck.

To cite difficulties in the planning process is not to complain or level accusations, but simply to note the histories of problems with an eye to avoiding them in the future.

We could, like Northampton, have opted for a top-down, narrowly based process that more quickly and cheaply produced a leaner document - but it would not have been ours, that would not have been us. For us, maximum public participation and acceptance were the highest good. That by definition meant a slower, more deliberative and iterative process.

Clearly, there was a price to be paid for the slowness of our process (deliberate or unintentional,) though not necessarily one that we should reject out of hand. For example: Although the committee expansion, coupled with our general desire to discuss each issue until we had reached the maximum level of consensus, likewise slowed us down, they also purchased us political good will and public buy-in - without which no Master Plan, however excellent in the abstract, could ever be implemented here.

And implementation is the key word. If the implementation of the Master Plan is to be successful, if we are not to relive and replicate the travails of the lengthy planning process (for one thing, we cannot: by November 2009, we will need to revise our Phased Growth Bylaw; that is our juridical Sword of Damocles,) then we need to learn its essential lessons. Above all: The Master Plan (re)presents a common vision, and that presumes an attitude of public trust, political maturity, and basic civility. We need to assume - at least hypothetically or for the sake of argument, until proven otherwise - that our fellow citizens are no less civic-minded than we are, that they, too, have the best interests of the majority at heart. Common goals presuppose some ability to subordinate our individual interests to the common good, in a word: to listen and to compromise. The CPC listened intently to what the citizens were saying, and although we as individuals did not and will not necessarily agree on everything, we pulled together to produce this product, and we believe that it accurately reflects our shared aspirations.

I am optimistic that we have reached that point of maturity. To my mind, the planning process and resultant Master Plan have so far been an unqualified success. If anyone needs proof of the collegial interaction and coherence of purpose that we can achieve, s/he need look no further than the Review Subcommittee, which brought together CPC members with widely divergent views, expertise, and experience. Each one of them will stand behind the integrity of Master Plan as well as his or her own individual vision of Amherst's future.

Conclusion:

The Master Plan is our answer to a welcome but serious challenge: Amherst is a very desirable place in which to live - to work, to study, to raise a family, to retire. The challenge involves how we will act in the face of critical new demands on the resources that make that quality of life possible.

The challenge is to maintain our standards of living, and to guarantee the advantages that we have enjoyed to new residents displaying an ever greater diversity of age, ethnicity, and class, and then to generations beyond. In other words, the challenge is to harmonize desires, principles of social justice, and resources - to live up to our ideals while living within our means, financially and ecologically.

The key to the Master Plan is therefore a tripartite system of information, evaluation, and action. For decades, residents have affirmed their preference for the existing historical system of village centers linked by large swaths of open space. At the same time, we insist on excellent public services and want an Amherst with the feel of a small town but the cosmopolitan values of the big city. The Master Plan proposes that we inventory our resources and assess how they can be used in the most sustainable manner reconcilable with these goals.

If we begin by agreeing on which areas should be developed and which preserved, we can more usefully confine our debates to the smaller remainder.

A comprehensive overhaul of our development regulations, buttressed by Green Infrastructure, Climate Action, and Economic Development Plans will ensure that we put principles into practice. The heart of the Master Plan is thus the call for an ethic of sustainability in all Town policies and activities.

We have been delighted to see residents already increasingly making reference to the Master Plan—in newspaper columns and letters, at meetings of boards and committees, in the last election campaign, even in everyday conversation. This is as it should be: It is the product of the community's input, and it is the community's right to assert ownership of it.

In one sense, a Master Plan is much more like a constitution than a tax code. Although the Master Plan discusses many specifics of policy, its greatest value is as a point of reference. Rather than providing set answers, it highlights issues, identifies principles, and sets forth procedures for making difficult choices. We still may not agree on everything (this is Amherst, after all,) but we can now agree that debate will henceforth turn on the interpretation of this document. It is the foundation for civil conversation and sound policy.

We express our deepest thanks to all who made this process and result possible: the Town bodies that authorized the creation of a Master Plan, the staffers and committee members who worked on it (some for many years,) and all in the community who contributed their ideas. All, equally, will need to contribute to its ultimate success as we move from ideal to implementation.

Amherst has changed a great deal in the past 250 years. With the aid of the Master Plan, we can begin to face the unprecedented changes of the next quarter-millennium with confidence and common purpose.

Respectfully submitted,

Jim Wald
Chair, Comprehensive Planning Committee